

Pest Identification

Birds

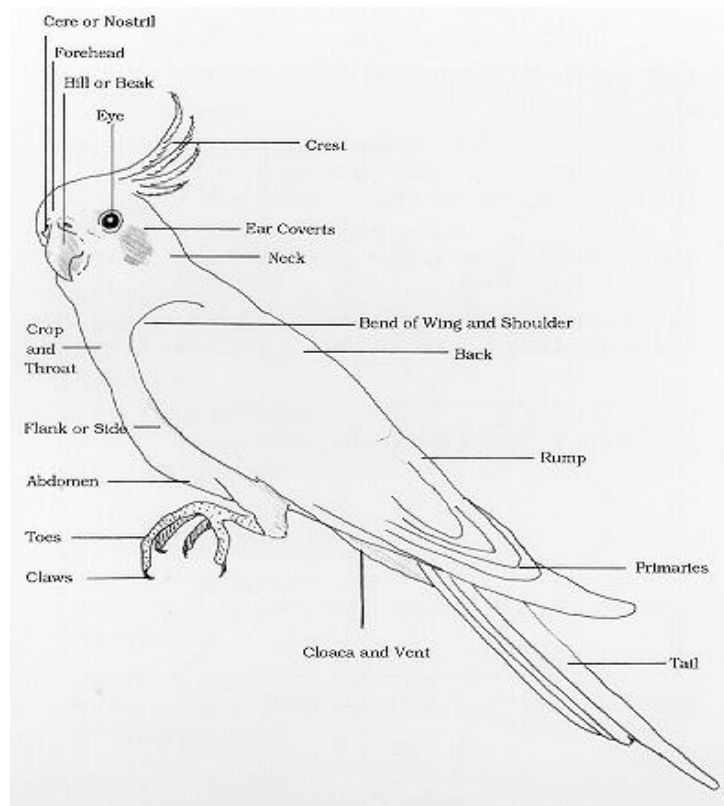
Pest Bird Identification

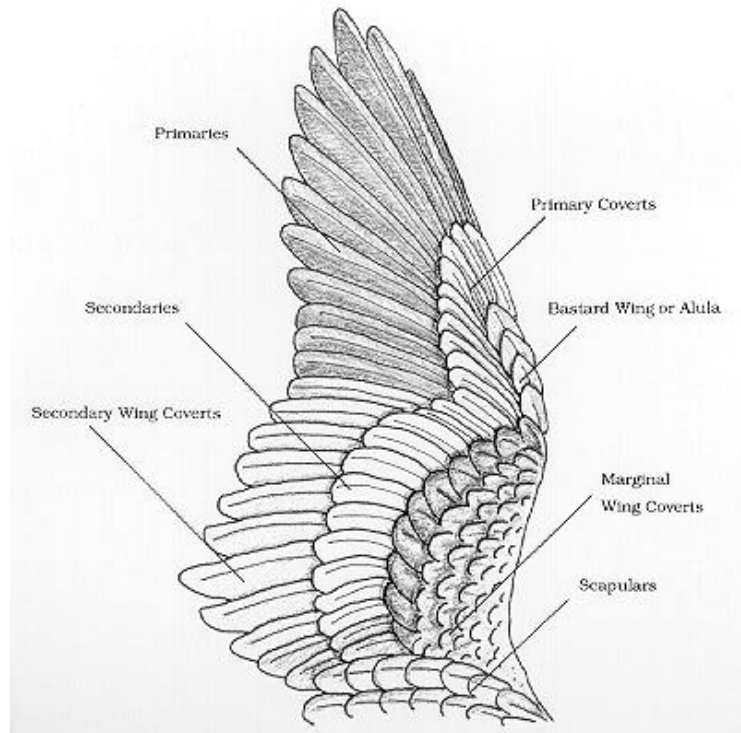
Introduction

Proper identification is an important function of any thorough bird management program. Knowing a particular bird species' unique biology, habits and characteristics can help determine the "how, what, when, and where" of a bird management program, helping to ensure a successful effort.

Proper identification is important not only to ensure effective bird management programs, but also to help differentiate "pest" birds from other non-pest species that may be protected by state or federal law.

Bird Structures/Characteristics





Pest Bird Identification

PIGEON (*Columba livia*)

The rock dove, more commonly referred to as a pigeon, is one of 11 species of the family *Columbidae* that breed in North America. Perhaps the most ever-present pest bird, pigeons have adapted to a variety of environments, from cities to agricultural settings and from buildings to cliffs. They have become the most serious bird pest associated with buildings.

Identification

Approximately 13 inches (33 cm) long.

Varies in color from white to black. Most are characterized by a dark gray head with iridescent sheen, a light gray back and wings with two dark bands.

The rock dove has stocky body with short legs, a short neck and a small head.

During flight, the tip of the tail is usually square and black.



Biology

Pigeons nest in various protected locations, such as the underside of bridges, building ledges, rafters in barns and other open buildings, roofs, air conditioners, signs, etc. One unique case even dealt with pigeons infesting a rare Saguaro cactus in a yard.

Their loosely constructed nests usually consist of sticks, stems, leaves and other debris. Nests that are reused often become solid with the accumulation of droppings and debris.

Habits

In rural settings pigeons normally feed on seeds, grain and fruit. They find areas with spilled silage, such as grain elevators, railroad yards and mills, all of which are very attractive feeding sites. In urban areas pigeons feed on handouts, garbage, vegetable matter and insects.

In contrast to many other bird species, pigeons prefer flat and smooth surfaces, such as rooftops, for resting and feeding. If threatened, these locations afford them a quick get away. Pigeons gather in flocks that use the same roosting and feeding areas. Feeding usually occurs no more than a few miles from the roosting site.

Damage

Pigeons have very acidic droppings that can cause significant damage to equipment, painted building surfaces, marble, limestone and etc. Fresh droppings create slippery situations on sidewalks, ledges and other flat surfaces where they accumulate.

Droppings also contaminate unprocessed grain and processed food and can contain a variety of disease-causing bacteria, fungi, nematodes, etc. Pigeons serve as reservoirs for several viral encephalitic diseases.

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*)

The European starling is one of two species of the family *Sturnidae* that was introduced into North America from Europe in the late 1800s. Starlings are distributed throughout the United States, including the southern tip of Alaska, and most of Canada and Mexico. Starlings occur in a wide range of habitats, from farms to urbanized areas.

Identification

7.5 to 8.5 inches (19 to 22 cm) long.

Color varies with the season: In the summer, they are purplish-black with an iridescent sheen; in the winter, the tips of the feathers are marked with white and gold, giving them a speckled appearance.

Long pointy bill, bright yellow in the spring and summer, turns dark in the winter.

Stocky body and their very short tail makes them appear tailless.

Starlings produce a number of harsh rasping, squawking and squeaking calls.



Biology

Starlings usually select nesting sites that are in the shadows of brighter light. In urban areas, they tend to roost in building cavities at heights 20 to 70 feet (6 to 21 m) above the average street light. In suburban and rural settings, they often nest in tree holes, birdhouses with holes larger than 1.5 inches (4 cm) in diameter and other protected areas 2 to 60 feet (1 to 18 m) above the ground.

Nests are constructed of twigs, grass and debris, then lined with feathers and other soft materials.

Habits

Some starlings migrate as cold weather approaches. Birds that do not migrate usually roost in protected areas such as buildings in urban areas. At dawn, starlings travel as far as 70 miles (113 km) from the roosting site to a feeding site. Starlings feed on the ground and away from their roosting sites.

During spring and early summer, the principal diet of nesting birds is insects and occasionally soft fruit. During late summer, fall and winter, their diet preference shifts to grains, seeds and fruits. They can consume as much as an ounce (28 grams) of grain per day.

When they return to the roosting area at dusk, they first perch on telephone wires, bridges, buildings, trees and other similar items. After sunset, they fly around the roosting site, perhaps several times, before settling in for the evening.

Damage

European starlings have been known to nest in dryer vents as well as vents in kitchens, bathrooms and over ovens.

Starlings contaminate animal feed and foul buildings and sidewalks in the vicinity of their roosts. Most people are bothered by this accumulation of droppings and the irritating noises starlings create at their roosting sites.

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*)

The house, or English, sparrow is one of two species of the family *Passeridae* that occurs in North America. It is distributed throughout the United States, most of Canada and Mexico and has become well established in rural and urban settings.

Identification

Approximately 6 inches (15 centimeters) long.

Color varies with the gender. Males have a black patch under the beak, on the cheeks and on the rump. In the winter, the gray feather tips hide these black areas. The top of the male sparrow's head is gray-white. Females and young sparrows are dull brown, with a dirty white breast and brow.



Biology

Sparrows prefer to nest in protected man-made and natural areas. Both male and female sparrows construct a large and flimsy nest from straw, grass, feathers, strips of paper, string and other debris. The following are popular sparrow nesting sites:

- ?? Building ledges
- ?? Openings in structures
- ?? Gutters
- ?? Signs
- ?? Light fixtures
- ?? Birdhouses
- ?? Beneath the eaves of a house
- ?? Bridges
- ?? Electrical power lines and transformers
- ?? Occasionally in trees

Habits

In rural settings, sparrows cause considerable damage to crops such as wheat and sorghum, as individuals consume as much as 0.2 ounces (6 grams) per day. They congregate in urban areas in the winter and disperse to rural areas in the spring. Flocks of juvenile birds and non-breeding adults sometimes travel four to five miles from nest sites to feeding areas.

Damage

A growing problem is house sparrow's frequent nesting in kitchen, bathroom, oven and dryer vents. They foul structures with their droppings, particularly those areas used for roosting and loafing sites. Sparrows also create problems by entering food plants, warehouses, department stores and malls where they often contaminate food products or other merchandise.

Their droppings can contain a variety of disease-causing bacteria, fungi, nematodes, etc. Sparrows are also considered one of the major reservoirs of St. Louis Encephalitis. Further, numerous blood-feeding parasitic mites associated with sparrows also bite humans.

GULL (*Larus argentatus*, *Larus delawarensis*)

The herring gull, *Larus argentatus*, and ring-billed gull, *Larus delawarensis*, (Family: *Laridae*) are two of the more than 50 species of gulls throughout the United States. They are the two most commonly encountered gulls in the Northeast; their range extends from Maine south and along the Gulf Coast to New Orleans. Both species may be found the length of the Mississippi River basin. The herring gull also occurs throughout most of Canada; the ring-billed gull is in the middle Plain States.

Identification

Gulls are distinguished from other birds based on their large size, long pointed wings, square tails, hooked bills and webbed feet.

Herring gull is 23 to 26 inches (58 to 66 centimeters) long. It has a light gray back and wings, which have black tips with white spots. It has a white head and breast, a red spot near the tip of the lower portion of its bill and yellow eyes.



Ring-billed gull is 18 to 20 inches (46 to 51 centimeters) long. It has a slightly darker gray back and wings, which have black tips with white spots. It has a white head and breast, a black ring near the tip of its bill and yellow eyes.



Laughing gull is 15 to 17 inches (38 to 43 centimeters) long and is easily recognized by its black head.



The greater black-backed gull is black on its back and the top of its wings; however, the wing tips are white, as are its head, breast and tail.



Biology

Both species tend to nest in colonies on the ground. The nest is constructed of seaweed, grass, sticks and feathers. Herring gulls occasionally nest on ledges or cliffs, whereas ring-billed gulls occasionally nest in low trees.

Habits

Gulls feed on a wide variety of materials, including fish, clams, mussels, garbage, dead animals, insects, earthworms, rodents and fledgling gulls. The ring-billed gull is the species most often found around fast food restaurants, whereas the herring gull prefers landfill areas. They often loaf in large open areas with a good field of view.

They are very gregarious birds, often roosting by the thousands during the breeding season and winter. It is not uncommon to find several species roosting together. Feeding sites can be located as far as 40 miles (64 kilometers) from the roosting area.

Damage

Gulls in the urban environment are often a major nuisance. They foul public areas and residential and commercial buildings with their extremely smelly droppings. They can be very noisy and aggressive when begging for food. Gulls are responsible for more than 50 percent of documented aircraft bird strikes. Furthermore, they are a particular nuisance around harbors, landfills and agricultural areas.

Ring-billed gulls have adapted their nesting habitat to rooftops of buildings in some locations. The feathers and litter the gulls bring into the nest site cause roof drains to clog and water overflows into the buildings below. They also peck holes in flat roofs covered with rubber type coatings. The resulting leaks cause damage to the buildings' ceilings and contents.

CANADA GOOSE (*Branta canadensis*)

There are at least 11 geographical species, which range in distribution throughout the United States, Canada and the northern areas of Mexico. At one time, this species was migratory, however it is now able to overwinter at sites where they are fed regularly.

Identification

Approximately 22 to 45 inches (56 to 114 centimeters) long.

Brownish gray in color with a black head, neck and tail feathers. A distinctive white triangular patch is found on the underside of the neck.



Biology

Geese typically nest at the edges of lakes, ponds, swamps and other large bodies of water. The nests, which are usually located on rocks or clumps of grass within the body of water or in grass near its edge, are constructed of sticks, mud and grass and lined with feathers. Some geese are adapting to reduced nesting habitats by utilizing building balconies and roofs.

Habits

Canadian geese feed in the water on submerged vegetation and on land in stubble cornfields, or on winter wheat, clover and waste grain. They thrive in many suburban areas, subsisting on handouts from humans. Feeding sites tend to be open with good visibility.

Damage

These majestic birds are beautiful to watch in flight as they travel to various feeding sites; however, they can create major problems in their nesting areas. Golf courses, parks, residences with large ponds and other locations can become overrun by large numbers of geese, which foul the area with large and numerous droppings. The birds often eat and wear grass to the ground. Furthermore, geese can be aggressive with humans, and are becoming an increasing threat to aircraft.

WOODPECKER (*Picidae*)

This family (*Picidae*) is represented by 22 species that breed in North America. Various species are found throughout the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Identification

6 to 18 inches (15 to 45 centimeters).

Vary greatly in color. White back and belly and wings that are predominately black with white spots. Males have a patch of red on the back of their neck.

Distinguishing feature is the sharp pointed beak used to dig and probe into trees in search for insects or to feed on sap.

Pileated woodpecker is 18 inches (45 centimeters) long. It is mostly black with white markings on the side of the head and neck and has a bright red crest.



Downy woodpecker is about 6 inches (15 centimeters) long with the bill about half the length of the head.



Hairy woodpecker is 9 inches (22 centimeters) long with the bill about the length of the head.



Biology

Woodpeckers typically nests in dead wood 15 to 70 feet (5 to 21 meters) high in the tree. Their preferred food is insects, particularly carpenter ants.

Habits

Woodpeckers routinely drum for food on wood structures, earning them occasional pest status. Unfortunately, they prefer to drum on materials that resonate loudly, including gutters, vents, metal siding and dead tree stubs. This activity can create an obvious annoyance to homeowners and occasionally causes structural damage.

Damage

Damage to structural wood, telephone poles, signs and similar materials is often cosmetic and localized. However, wood structures that remain seasonally vacant, such as cabins or log homes, can be heavily damaged. Parts of structures that are attacked include siding, eaves and shutters.

Some of this damage is the result of the birds pecking in the wood while searching for wood-boring insects, such as carpenter bees.

CROW, RAVEN, MAGPIE AND JAY (*Corvidae*)

This family, *Corvidae*, is represented by 16 species that breed in North America. Various species are found throughout the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Identification

These birds are 9 to 27 inches (23 to 69 centimeters) long.

While crows and ravens are coal black, most of the remaining species are brilliantly colored.

Birds in the *Corvidae* tend to squawk and produce grating sounds.

American crow is the most commonly found species. It is large, 17 to 21 inches (43 to 53 centimeters) long, and black with a fan-shaped tail.



Biology

The American crow nest, usually located in a tree, is constructed of twigs, grasses and sticks.

Habits

The preferred habitat is deciduous trees along bodies of water, open pine forests, orchards and parks. American crows form communal roosts that include younger birds from previous years.

Damage

Most of the damage caused by these birds is to agricultural products, especially seeds, nut crops and corn seedlings. Crows and ravens have adapted well to the urban environment where they readily feed on road kills, garbage and refuse.

In suburban areas, they pick through uncovered garbage left at the roadside or in dark plastic bags. Crows and ravens are predaceous on other birds, fledglings, eggs, amphibians, reptiles and small rodents. They use utility poles, lampposts and even the tops of buildings as perches from which they look for prey, roosts and nesting sites. Crows cause even more damage and problems for homeowners who live in the vicinity of a roost.

Information obtained from Steve Smith, PCT-Online, Pest Bird ID Guide. Photos courtesy of the USGS.